



# Leveraging Dignity Theory to Understand Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Children's Rights

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## Abstract

This article outlines how dignity theory could be used to better understand bullying behaviors. Dignity is defined here as the inherent worth of every human being and it allows us to trace the motivations behind bullying behaviors to broader social values that are rarely the primary focus of bullying research, as well as prevention and intervention efforts. In this manner, the theory could elucidate the cultural patterns which contribute to not only child bullying and cyberbullying, but to workplace bullying, and to similar abusive behaviors among adults. We give special attention to cyberbullying and illustrate how dignity theory can clarify why this behavior is not only about online safety but about relational issues, which are reflective of social values. We argue that seeing cyberbullying through the lens of online safety can limit the scope of artificial intelligence–based solutions whose development is gaining momentum at this time. We provide suggestions about dignity-based considerations that collaborations between computer and social scientists could take into account in order to pave the way towards innovation that upholds dignity and children's rights.

**Keywords** Dignity · Cyberbullying · Bullying · Online safety · Social values · Children's rights · Artificial intelligence · Social media · Prevention and intervention

“Since dignity is a basic human need, dignity in a ‘dignitarian society’ will be treated as both a human right and a responsibility. Dignified treatment will be just the way it is [...] a world where dignity is a norm, a natural and expected way of being.”

(Fuller & Gerloff, 2008, p. 5).

In recent parliamentary hearings about bullying and cyberbullying in Ireland, parliamentarians raised concern that these behaviors remain such a prevalent problem, even after all these years of research and concerted prevention and

intervention efforts (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2020, 2021). As online safety researchers and practitioners in Europe and the USA, respectively, we are also frequently met with the worrying eyes of parents and caregivers and the inquisitive ones of journalists, who wonder how come, after all these years of extensive work, we cannot seem to put an end to bullying and cyberbullying?

In this article, we trace the often-unstated assumptions about bullying and cyberbullying which may inform intervention and prevention efforts and hamper their outcomes. The concepts we introduce in this paper and the issues we raise apply equally to bullying and cyberbullying, and they are not limited to the context of children and youth but are relevant for problems that arise in adult populations, such as workplace bullying. Bullying and cyberbullying are inextricably linked: Current cyberbullying definitions are derived from offline bullying, and we know from research that offline and online bullying tends to go hand in hand, at least where children are concerned (Görzig et al., 2017; Kowalski et al., 2014). The online or digital cannot be considered as a space that is somehow separate or divorced from offline life, or “the real world,” as it is sometimes referred to. Online is no less real than offline, and offline life is the context of speech

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and behavior we see online (Johansson & Englund, 2021; Wegge et al., 2013).

We propose, and here outline, a different approach to addressing bullying and cyberbullying, one based on human dignity and thus each child's dignity; an approach that we think has paradigm-shifting potential. While "dignity" may not have a precise definition, there appears to be an agreement on its overall characteristics: As inherent to human beings, it is not acquired through action, and it cannot be lost in that manner (Piechowiak, 2015). Dignity signifies the inherent worth of every human being which, unlike respect, does not have to be earned (Fuller & Gerloff, 2008; Hicks, 2011; Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, n.d.). Neither can it be taken away. In a way, we can think of it as the opposite of humiliation, which implies reducing a person in others' eyes. We suggest that, in order to understand bullying behaviors, we need to go beyond "aggressive acts" and recognize the normative values that create the conditions of social relations, *including* social aggression and public humiliation—not only among children and youth but among adults as well. We can posit bullying and cyberbullying as an attack on a person's dignity, which can happen when someone higher in social rank or status or with more power abuses their dominant position or power (and hence this behavior can be referred to as an example of "rankism," see Fuller & Gerloff, 2008). Following this logic, what allows for school bullying and cyberbullying is the same set of normative values that enable workplace bullying and so-called micro-aggressions later in life.

This article looks specifically at definitions and perceptions of cyberbullying in light of dignity theory: cyberbullying behaviors as dignity violations and the difference between dignity and "false dignity." To illustrate, we offer two cyberbullying scenarios that depict dignity violations. We show why defining cyberbullying strictly as an online safety issue limits the scope of possible remedies, while centering dignity has the opposite effect. In addition, we consider other theories that have sought to explain dignity violations in order to demonstrate the value of dignity theory. Finally, we explain why it is important to consider dignity when designing cyberbullying prevention and intervention measures as online platforms increasingly move toward employing artificial intelligence to address the problem.

## Our Focus on Context

By highlighting the role of culture and society in motivating bullying behaviors, we by no means wish to downplay the role of personal responsibility in bullying situations. We also do not wish to underestimate the importance of individual, peer, and family predictors of bullying perpetration or the role of school climate and school and country-level policies.

Much work has been put into changing the school climate (Yang et al., 2020) for bullying and cyberbullying prevention and intervention and implementing social-emotional learning-based (Chadwick, 2014) programs to teach about emotional regulation and empathy.

Rather, we propose that non-dignitarian values can allow for or facilitate anti-social behaviors, impulsivity/hyperactivity, and a lack of affective empathy, which can result in bullying perpetration in adolescence (Álvarez-García et al., 2015). In the family context, for instance, exposure to family violence is a risk factor for becoming a perpetrator (Álvarez-García et al., 2015 cf. Low & Espelage, 2013, 2014), and the idea that children who are abused at home by their parents, relatives, or siblings then take it out on their weaker peers has found long-standing expression in the literature as well (Williams, 2020). Some would argue that such a tendency reflects an inherent urge to belittle others. Yet we wonder to what extent this urge is a part of human nature versus a more situational need that arises from humiliation and subsequent anger.

It is also extremely important to emphasize that the above explanation—the almost stereotypical image of a hurt "bully" who takes their pain out on others—is only part of the picture. The more socially competent "bully" who successfully navigates peer relations to fulfill their own needs of autonomy, competence, and belonging is another explanation that has also been well-acknowledged in the literature (Hawley et al., 2010). Evolutionary psychologists have pointed out that children who are especially good at positioning themselves in social hierarchies leverage aggression strategically with pro-sociality in order to earn status for themselves (Hawley et al., 2010). Such children are more likely to aim aggression at those who are close or equal in status to them and therefore represent a threat to their status, rather than at less socially competent or skilled children who are considered "weaker"<sup>1</sup> and thus not a threat to their status. The cited authors even wonder if such aggression should in fact be discouraged if it plays "a role in the competent pursuit of human needs satisfaction" (Hawley et al., 2010 p.

<sup>1</sup> We deliberately place the word "weaker" here into quotation marks because we challenge the idea that children who do not play the game of social positioning are less socially competent and are necessarily weaker. They might have social anxiety and less social skills—but does that make them "weak"? Could it also be that some of those "weaker" children could in fact play the game of social positioning very well if they wanted to, as they understand social dynamics and would know how to use their social skills to their advantage, and yet they refuse to do that because they do not consider aggressiveness towards their peers (even towards those who are equal to them in status) to be right or ethical? Could it in fact be the case that the established theories of group, peer, and power dynamics never questioned the underlying premise that children and adults need to compete to have their basic needs met?

111). According to dignity theory, however, socially competent aggression, too, would be considered non-dignitarian, because an environment where one has to use aggression or any act that would hurt another human being (even a human being equal in status to the perpetrator) is not safe, or conducive to well-being and, in the school context, to learning. Indeed, an environment in which aggression is normative as a means of meeting psychological needs is the very definition of non-dignitarian environment.

## The Meaning of Dignity

The concept of dignity is a fundamental value in national and international legal systems. Dignity is the source of human rights, which in turn “provide the criteria for the justice of laws”; “these criteria are considered to be given, objective and not relative”; “dignity is considered inviolable and should never be sacrificed for other values”; “the possessor of dignity (his/her good) is an end in itself, an autotelic end and can therefore never be treated purely instrumentally” (Piechowiak, 2015, pp. 5–6). Scholars have recently, however, pointed out that the meaning of dignity has been variously interpreted in the body of law internationally, even to denote contradictory things, and that the term risks becoming meaningless (Schultziner & Rabinovici, 2012; McCrudden, 2008, 2013). While we acknowledge this current shortcoming of the term, it is not the goal of this paper to address this. Rather, we adopt a specific meaning of dignity put forth by contemporary scholars whose work we cite below and apply this definition to bullying and cyberbullying.

As a universal and inviolable right, dignity is found to be a foundational concept in many human rights documents, notably in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948), whose Article 1 states that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Furthermore, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) refers to dignity eight times, including in the Preamble, which specifies “the inherent dignity [...] of all members of the human family [...] as the foundation of freedom, peace and justice in the world.” (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1989).

Dignity scholars have previously pointed out that, while “it almost seems as if the idea of human dignity is axiomatic and therefore requires no theoretical defense” (Kateb, 2011, p. 1), the word “dignity” has nonetheless been thrown around as a concept without due consideration for the complexity behind its meaning (Kateb, 2011). Legal scholars have observed that “there is hardly any principle more difficult to fathom in law than human dignity” (Hale, 2009, p. 104). Some scholars emphasized the paradox behind the understanding of dignity as universal even when

accompanied with the contemporary recognition that values are culturally constructed and therefore relative. If values are cultural products rather than things that exist per se, objectively, how, then, can dignity as a value be universal? (Piechowiak, 2015).

Echoing also some of the interpretations of Immanuel Kant’s (1785) writings on dignity which have been characterized by some scholars as contradictory (Kato & Schonrich, 2020), in this article we take dignity to be the inherent worth of every human being, which, unlike respect, does not have to be earned (see, e.g., Fuller & Gerloff, 2008; Hicks, 2011). We recognize that, historically, there have been other interpretations, including that the term might connote the supremacy of human beings among other species (Della Mirandola, 2012). We have chosen, however, to adopt the definition and meaning that we specify here and that has been put forth by contemporary scholars who have sought to apply the concept of dignity defined in human rights and other spheres of life (Hartling & Lindner, 2016; Lindner, 2006). Our aim is to leverage this meaning to shed much-needed light on the root causes of bullying and cyberbullying and to articulate intervention and prevention approaches that address the root causes of these problems, rather than merely their symptoms. In the following paragraph, however, we offer a brief overview of how the concept of dignity evolved to provide context for the meaning of the term that we adopt in this article and that we then apply to bullying and cyberbullying.<sup>2</sup>

## Brief Overview of How the Concept Evolved

Dignity is a concept that goes to the heart of what it means to be human. Some scholars point out that reflections on the universality of dignity (without the use of the term or its equivalent) can be found in Plato’s writings (Piechowiak, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Others stress that dignity or its equivalent appears later, in Roman philosophy, where Cicero used it first to denote the Stoics’ “axioma,” or “honor, respect, valuation, volition,” and that from the very onset it carries the tension between its understanding as the “unchangeable, essential inner worth of men [and] a contingent, external property like status, rank or office” (von der Pfordten, 2012, p.217). From then on, Christian thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas, referred to *dignitas* as an “essential, unchangeable quality” unrelated to position or

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the historical and legal interpretations of the term, please see (Kato & Schonrich, 2020; Schachter, 1983; McCrudden, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> This description of the origins of the term dignity draws on Greco-Roman and Christian roots and therefore it may be less resonant with readers who do not come from cultures and societies with these origins. This is a work in progress and perspectives on dignity and various forms of bullying from scholars outside Europe and the North American content would be very much needed and welcome.

status, and bestowed upon man by God, as the only creature able to reason who nonetheless breaks away from his own dignity through sin (von der Pfordten, 2012, pp. 217–218). For both Cicero and Christian thinkers, therefore, the source of dignity is external—denoting rank or position in the case of the former, to God in the case of the latter. Renaissance writers such as Bartolomeo Fazio and Giannozzo Manetti, adopting a view of man as essentially good, tried to break away from the Christian understanding, and for them *dignitas* was tied to the human ability to reason rather than to God; nonetheless, they did not see *dignitas* as a special quality based on which a special ethical framework could be developed (von der Pfordten, 2012). It was Kant who gave dignity a non-religious understanding by positing the moral imperative of, “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never as a means” (von der Pfordten, 2012, p. 220 cf. Kant, 1903). Kant sees human dignity as derived from the human ability to self-regulate and make autonomous decisions through reason.

## Bullying and Cyberbullying as Dignity Violations: False Dignity

Bullying and cyberbullying can be considered a form of “rankism” or abuse of rank or power (Fuller & Gerloff, 2008).<sup>4</sup> From a functionalist perspective, rank serves a purpose. It is argued that society arises out of meritocracy, i.e., people are understood to achieve their rank in society based on how hard they work matched by their motivation, interests, and abilities. However, the role of context and social capital cannot be underestimated in how individuals achieve rank in society. Not all people are starting from the same place, as people who have access to more successful and higher-status social networks are more likely to achieve higher rank (Demirkiran & Gençer, 2017). This view of a meritocratic society is problematic because, apart from violating the notion of equality of all human beings, which forms the basis of human rights law as discussed above, thinking that one is better than others because of one’s rank or possessions or some other features can provide an excuse for treating others who are deemed less than oneself in belittling ways; furthermore, it implies

<sup>4</sup> Dignity scholars tend to describe conflict and rank as inevitable in society, rank being a common organizational unit. However, once someone *abuses* their rank, thinking they are better than someone else and treating another as if they were less, conflict and rank become expressions of rankism. Disagreement and conflict—and emotions arising out of disagreement/conflict—are not rankism or violations of dignity in and of themselves, as long as one party to the conflict is not acting from the belief that they are superior, the scholars say.

that one needs to have something (rank, money, looks, etc.) in order to have dignity or be valued as a human being, implying that one cannot have dignity without these. This thinking is captured by the concept of “false dignity,” as conceptualized by dignity scholar Donna Hicks: i.e., “the belief that our worthiness comes from external sources,” (2011, p. 116) such as needing praise or approval from others to feel good about oneself; desiring high-status positions to show to self and others that one is successful or worthy; or thinking that one is better than others, due to class, race or ethnicity, income, property, or physical appearance (Hicks, 2011, 2018). In other words, false dignity relies on external validation, while dignity is an inherent quality that need not be earned. False dignity then appears to be akin to the other historical interpretation of the meaning of the term dignity that we refer to in the paragraph above where dignity is a sense of honor that one derives from one’s worldly success, status, or other merits that are valued in a particular social and cultural setting (von der Pfordten, 2012). We see false dignity as a key psychosocial and cultural driver of bullying and cyberbullying. In our interpretation, false dignity is not part of dignity but rather the opposite of dignity and perhaps more akin to pride or vanity. If dignity is inherent to a human being and not dependent on superficial characteristics or external conditions, then false dignity stems from the perceived need to derive self-worth from physical attributes or conditions dependent on others, such as praise, socially defined success, and group dynamics.

We live in a culture where certain achievements or traits such as good looks, money, success, and power tend to be valued, and, crucially, they tend to imply a self-worth based on these criteria of success or power imbalance—power over another.<sup>5</sup> Even in terms of dignity, there is an assumption that “haves” own more of it than “have nots” (i.e., those with more success and power can secure a greater sense of dignity for themselves). In the online context, technological design mirrors these assumptions and values in the form of encouraging more follows, “likes,” “shares,” and overall attention (where attention from others is perceived as a dignity-securing value).

In an article on bullying and social exclusion anxiety, social psychologist Dorte Marie Søndergaard relates the feeling of dignity to the feeling of meaningfulness when one is acknowledged as having legitimacy as part of a group, for example, when they feel accepted by a group of peers in their class (Søndergaard, 2012). She explains that the risk of being judged as unworthy of belonging to a group is always present in social contexts. It spurs the social exclusion anxiety that sets in motion behaviors that can result in bullying, such as the production of contempt and condemnation, which are the opposite of dignity. If a few of us agree that

<sup>5</sup> See Nelson et al. (2019) for how some of these privileges constitute a source of power in bullying situations among preadolescents.

some individuals are “deplorable,” “uncool,” or “unworthy” and are therefore “othered,” and we in turn decide on some traits that we consider to be “cool,” then this shared acceptance of values that form our group norms allows us to alleviate our own social exclusion anxiety—giving a sense of temporary security that we will not be excluded and subjected to contempt (Søndergaard, 2012). When anxiety intensifies and needs to be attenuated, the production of contempt looks for a target that can become the object of bullying. We observe that this group dynamic is not much different from what can happen among adults in the workplace, except that adults tend to be better at concealing their aggressive actions, thus the term “microaggressions,” and not crossing the line of overt aggression, which is typically condemned and prohibited (Dzurec et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2017).

## What We Are Proposing

Following dignity theory, it is not enough to teach children (or adults, for that matter) that it is not acceptable to rise in status through bullying or cyberbullying; as a field, we need to be able to agree that human beings *do not need to rise in status in order to have dignity* and to treat others with dignity. This is the key contribution of our article which goes beyond what scholars writing about human rights have raised thus far. Dignity is innate, primordial—not earned; it is inviolate, not something that can be added, threatened, or removed. Designing interventions that would stimulate the application of dignity to bullying prevention education and school practice in a way that resonates with children and teens is what we are proposing. This would also mean an active effort on adults’ part to reexamine the values that we hold, or we risk hypocrisy. For example, while competition among individuals is not necessarily problematic, we should not be assigning greater worth and dignity to the winners while thinking less of those who are not as successful (Deutsch, 2011).

## For Example, “Molly” and “Zoe”

Cyberbullying, seen through this dignity-related, value-based lens, has little to do with aggression. To provide an example, let us consider the case of secondary school students “Molly” and “Zoe.” If Molly sees Zoe sharing content on social media which shows Zoe having fun and enjoying life, and Molly does not in that moment feel as if she is having fun in her life, Molly might feel as if she is less worthy than Zoe. If Molly then posts some ironic comments with the intent to denigrate the fun experiences Zoe has shared and thus feel better about herself, such an act in and of itself might logically be seen as aggressive, or “cyberbullying”; but aggression itself is not the cause.

The idea that someone’s life is less worthy than someone else’s and that someone should feel less worthy just because their life appears to be less fun is at the heart of the problem. On the other hand, if the primary driver behind Zoe’s posting was not the sharing of a fun experience with her friends and community but to showcase or even brag about how good her life is and to feel more worthy than her peers because of such experience, then Zoe’s motivation itself comes from a position of “false dignity.” Therefore, a bullying or cyberbullying act in itself might be aggressive, but merely getting rid of the aggressive behavior will do little to solve the underlying problem that gives rise to it. False dignity and the cultural factors related to it are rarely a focus of research in the bullying and cyberbullying literature, and yet they are key drivers of the behaviors.

## How to Live by and Teach Dignity Principles?

One might rightly ask, how do we examine ourselves as to whether we are living by dignity standards and how do we teach these standards to children? What does it mean for a culture and society to think and behave in a dignitary manner? Is it reasonable at all to expect society and children to live by dignity standards? Dr. Hicks’ “Essential Elements of Dignity” could provide a useful starting point in considering what steps a dignity-based program might take in educating children about what it means to live by dignity standards (Hicks, 2011). According to this framework, there are essential elements that can lead to dignity upholding behaviors. Among others, these include approaching people as being one’s equal, i.e., neither inferior nor superior to you; ensuring that they feel safe from physical harm but also psychological humiliation; giving them attention through active listening and validating whatever their experience might be, rather than being dismissive or prejudiced about their thoughts and feelings; avoiding discrimination and treating others fairly, starting from the premise that others are trustworthy; and taking the initiative to apologize when you feel you have offended others (Hicks, 2011, p. 25). Translating these principles into a language that children and teens can understand and then soliciting their feedback about how these could be articulated so that they are relevant and resonant with them could make a good start.

## The Struggle over Definitions

Cyberbullying, or online or digital bullying, as it is sometimes called, derives its definition from offline or face-to-face bullying. Definitions refer to it as “willful and repeated harm



inflicted through the use of (...) electronic devices” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015, p. 5) or “an aggressive act or behavior that is carried out using electronic means by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Smith et al., 2008).<sup>6</sup> Researchers have recently pointed out that when we think of bullying and cyberbullying as subsets of aggressive behaviors, we imply that “bullies are aggressors,” (Kofoed & Staksrud, 2019) which confines the issue to problems and behaviors within an individual, downplaying group dynamics and, most importantly, the broader community and its social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, “power imbalance” was considered an essential component of bullying, though this has been revisited somewhat in the cyberbullying literature. The so-called victim had to be less powerful than the perpetrator in some way—for example, by being smaller in size (offline) or having less social capital.<sup>7</sup> Online, this could translate into having a larger network of supporters, more “likes” (suggestive of higher rank or status), exploiting anonymity or being more digitally skilled and hence effective in attacking the so-called victim. At the same time, the very act of bullying can create a power imbalance that did not exist beforehand, and hence bullying is used to raise someone’s status (Nelson et al., 2019; Pozzoli & Gini, 2021). The relationship between cyberbullying victimization and power is by no means straightforward. A person with significant social capital, such as many followers and large platform engagement, can also find herself on the receiving end of cyberbullying or harassment perpetration, ranging from insults to death threats. Such is the case with influencers and celebrities, for example, who are often targeted by people they do not know.

Anonymity and pseudonymity can be an important aspect of cyberbullying behaviors and refer to the fact that perpetrators can leverage technological affordances of online platforms to hide or veil their identity from their victims. Hiding behind one or more usernames, for example, can also give them a sense of power over the victim, which can facilitate further hurtful acts (Barlett, 2015; Menesini et al., 2012; Sticca & Perren, 2013). At the same time, research shows that adolescents often know who their “bullies” are online, especially when perpetration takes place in the context of

school life, where bullying tends to manifest both online and offline (Mishna et al., 2009).

A power imbalance is said to be one of the factors that distinguishes cyberbullying from conflict, which teens sometimes refer to as “drama” (Marwick & Boyd, 2014). Nonetheless, “drama” can include what adults refer to as “cyberbullying,” which research has shown teens consider an adult-centric term and do not identify with. The lines can be blurry, but our argument for leveraging dignity brings clarity by taking the focus off defining and distinguishing between behavior types, such as drama, conflict, and cyberbullying, and keeping our focus on the driving forces (dignity violations and rankism) behind them. Moreover, many of us have in any case seen that our adult-centric methods of addressing cyberbullying are limited in effectiveness.

Research has shown the importance of the so-called bystander as a contextualizing factor in bullying and cyberbullying (Bastiaensens et al., 2014), with the bystander’s opportunity to assist the victim and influence the outcome or the amount of harm that could arise from an incident. “Bystander” is a term that applies to those who witness the victimization in some way and might choose to support the victim, support the perpetrator, or remain silent. As we argue, focusing on the underlying values might assist with engaging bystanders in a constructive manner.

## Cyberbullying Not Just an Online Safety Issue—or Even a Safety Issue

As it has been previously argued (Collier, 2013) and research has confirmed (Finkelhor et al., 2020), online safety, which includes education about various forms of online risks, including cyberbullying (but also, e.g., grooming, sexting, and self-harm risks) should be administered *not* as a separate/distinct area of training, but rather within the already established and evidence-based risk-prevention programs for their associated offline risks (e.g., bullying prevention for cyberbullying, sexual health education for sexting, etc.). In other words, what happens “online” is not divorced from the offline context or “the real world,” as it is sometimes called—although online is no less “real” than, and often the visible expression of, offline interaction, not only for teens but for everyone. Telling teens to switch off their phones and get back to the “real world” to minimize the risks or avoid cyberbullying will do little to address the problem. Cyberbullying tends to go hand in hand with offline bullying in the school context—they tend to overlap, with cyberbullying the extension of an offline incident (Kowalski et al., 2014). While we can try to regulate for safe, cyberbullying-free environments, cyberbullying is not only about freedom from online harm, as the argument we outline above shows; it is about the underlying cultural values around worth and

<sup>6</sup> Bullying and cyberbullying definitions are widely debated and are also currently being revised at UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation): <https://en.unesco.org/news/partnership-between-unesco-and-world-anti-bullying-forum>.

<sup>7</sup> Related to social dominance theory, researchers have written about social capital-driven bullying, which directly targets social rivals—those who are either slightly above or slightly below one’s perceived social status; students who are near the top of the social ladder frequently find themselves on the sending and receiving end of bullying (Faris & Felmlee, 2011). Some authors have described these status-driven behaviors as the process of “social positioning” (Thornberg, 2015).

success, and it is a relational issue too. It is about how young people view themselves in relation with others, as well as how they see and treat each other, based on what we believe and have, for generations, modeled for them about how to feel worthy and attain success. Viewing cyberbullying merely as a matter of tech features, online behavior, or an online safety issue severely limits our ability to find solutions to this problem. Social media platforms tend to see cyberbullying through the lens of safety as well, even though the context of cyberbullying among youth is largely school life, the focus of most of young people's social experiences and relationships. So companies treat cyberbullying primarily as an online safety issue, as indicated in their policy documents (e.g., community standards or guidelines), which stipulate what is allowed and what is not allowed on the platform. Cyberbullying is typically clustered there under "safety," and educational advice on how to address cyberbullying is provided in these companies' safety centers, sections of their platforms devoted to educational advice on how to keep safe while using the sites and apps (Milosevic, 2018, Viejo-Otero & Milosevic, 2021). For example, Meta's policy states that cyberbullying is not tolerated because "it prevents people from feeling safe and respected on Facebook" (Transparency Center, 2021).

### Dignity: a Timely Focus

Given that misunderstanding, dignity is especially important to consider at this point in time, with heightened interest in social justice, burgeoning interest in "responsible AI" (Arrieta et al., 2020), and especially growing recognition that states and other stakeholders, especially social media and technology, need to help ensure a balance of children's rights of protection (online as well as offline) with their rights of participation and provision, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child—especially as the Committee on the Rights of the Child has just (Feb. 4, 2021) adopted the first General Comment on youth *digital* rights (Livingstone, 2021).

Children's rights to protection on the one hand and participation on the other are often perceived to be in conflict, where the right to protection, which includes safety online and offline, to date finds itself at the winning end of the equation worldwide (Collins et al., 2021; Nishiyama, 2020; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017). Rights to participation include, among other things, children's right to express their views on matters that affect them. However, children's participation online has generally been seen by adults as risky and having the potential to jeopardize their protection rights to the point where "over and again, efforts to protect them unthinkingly curtail their participation rights in ways that they themselves are unable to contest" (Livingstone & Third, 2017, p. 661).

Their protection rights are still given significantly more attention even in the work of international bodies such as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). Such prioritization betrays a view of the child as that of a primarily vulnerable, passive, and even immature being (Nishiyama, 2020), while introducing the notion of dignity, the foundation of all human rights, into the work of addressing bullying can bring us closer to two goals: better align their protection rights with their rights of participation, positioning children as active stakeholders in this work, and broaden the focus out from mere victimization to include the relational dynamics and processes that underpin anti-social behaviors. Children's active participation regarding how to design effective dignity-based prevention and intervention is necessary; in fact, children's perspectives and lived experience are needed to determine whether dignity-based prevention and intervention is desirable and possible in their social contexts. Dignity-based measures cannot be imposed on children, even as they require active rethinking by adults of their own values and behaviors.

### Why Dignity Theory? Considering It among Similar Theories

Two well-established theories can be leveraged toward understanding dignity violations and public humiliation. Both Dominance Theory (Long & Pellegrini, 2003) and Social Dominance Theory (SDT) (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) seek to explain not only relationships between individuals but also the social order, in terms of inherent inequality, hierarchies, and the struggle for power (Evans & Smokowski, 2016). What fuels and maintains these hierarchies, according to these theories, is the desire for dominance and power. These theories have previously been applied to the topic of bullying, and they posit that bullying (and by extension cyberbullying) is driven by the desire to gain dominance and maintain high social status (Evans & Smokowski, 2016; Goodboy et al., 2016). Those who are in the position of dominance have higher social value and "all those material and symbolic things for which people strive" (Evans & Smokowski, 2016 cf. Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 31). The underlying driving force behind such a paradigm of human relations is, according to SDT, a personality trait called "social dominance orientation," or SDO, which is "an individual's degree of preference for inequality among social groups" (Goodboy et al., 2016 cf. Pratto et al., 1994 p. 741). Societies can then develop ideologies—around, e.g., racism and racial inequality, chauvinism, misogyny, etc.—which legitimize such hierarchies and result in consistent humiliation and marginalization of a group deemed low- or lower-status. Hence, SDO can be understood to be a driving force behind rankism as well. Unlike these theories, whose goal

is attaining a *social scientific* description, explanation, and consequently predictability of social behavior, rather than mitigating social aggression, Dignity Theory is primarily a *normative* theory, we argue. While Dignity Theory can be used to study humiliation and understand the underlying forces behind human behavior and social order, we see its value primarily in positing a set of values that are already embraced as aspirations of contemporary civilization and articulated in human rights and international law—though not yet always implemented and lived by. This means that if we were to live by the principles of dignity, then status or rank and all their insignia could not be used to think of oneself as better than others, nor could they be used to devalue another person. Such application of Dignity Theory to bullying and cyberbullying therefore allows us to propose a critical examination of values that *source* bullying behaviors but that are not even acknowledged by adults and therefore not taught to children. Unlike human rights documents and contributions that discuss bullying behaviors and children's rights offline and online, our article applies Dignity Theory directly to bullying and cyberbullying prevention.

### Dignity Violations: Examples

Here is what we mean by applying Dignity Theory directly to cyberbullying. Consider a hypothetical yet common example of a boy named Steven, 14, who posts a video of himself dancing on a social media platform. He loves to dance, even though he does not consider himself to be good at it, but he is trying to improve. He is not very popular; he is very insecure and does not have a strong support group among his peers. Yet, to his credit, Steven tries to get out of his comfort zone and explore who he could become by posting the video. A lack of a sense of dignity and self-worth might be motivating his actions too. Subsequently, he gets laughed at and humiliated in comments by his peers; someone remixes his video into a derisive meme which now seems to go viral; response videos mocking him are created by other peers. What drives these actions from Steven's peers? It could be said that some are doing it "just for fun," that some people just like to be mean, that nothing can be done about it—and that group dynamics is a factor too. But consider also that some might be commenting because they are equally insecure and did not have the courage to post their own dance video, even though they may have wanted to, and other insecure bystanders might be commenting abusively to increase their own status among their peers. All of these potential reasons for dignity violations are related to seeking false dignity and feeling a lack of one's own self-worth.

Then consider another, perhaps more subtle, example. Lynne, 17, is gaining popularity, reflected in more and more attention she is getting on Instagram. A close friend of hers,

Sally, is increasingly jealous and cannot communicate that to Lynne. She does not feel good about herself as compared to her friend anymore. She invites a close group of friends to a sleepover and deliberately neglects to invite Lynne. She even shares a few very subtle negative comments with other girls about Lynne's makeup and looks. Lynne finds out about the sleepover through a photo on Instagram. It seems like other girlfriends are starting to act a little distant too. She feels hurt and starts to question her Instagram activity. She posts less, overthinks each post, and worries. Is Lynne a victim, and should she be treated as such? She probably would not want to consider herself or be described as a victim—it could negatively affect her sense of self-worth, especially since victims of bullying tend to have lower social status. Let alone tell her parents, who in her view would only make a mountain out of a molehill. This case does not even meet the basic definition of cyberbullying; it is not repeated, and the social exclusion is not overt (her peers had not tagged Lynne to show her she was on the outs). Sally may not even be aware that she is doing all this to hurt Lynne; she might be acting instinctively to protect and strengthen her own sense of self. Some scholars would argue that Lynne needs to build resilience, and this is a good opportunity to do so<sup>8</sup>—after all, there will be many jealousies and betrayals in life. This is certainly true, but our point is different: Why should adults posit such situations as a normal part of the growing up process? Why would Sally need to trample over a peer's dignity to feel better about herself? Why can we not see both Sally and Lynne as having dignity, regardless of their looks, successes, popularity, and the like—and help them and their peers see that?

Looking at these scenarios in the context of dignity theory gives rise to some important questions about past approaches to bullying and cyberbullying and how we might move forward:

- Do we default to accepting these belittling behaviors because we see them as inherent to human nature and group dynamics, and therefore inevitable—something that children just need to assimilate in order to grow up?
- Can we rather think of belittling or rankist behaviors as a pattern of behavior that humans are socialized into rather than inherent to being human (or at least a blend of socialized behavior and environmental context)?
- Does our collective struggle to resolve the longstanding problem of bullying/cyberbullying stem in part from our confusion about what is learned vs. what is inherent, creating a contradiction between what we model and what we preach and thus causing further confusion in our children?

<sup>8</sup> <https://cyberbullying.org/cultivating-resilience-prevent-bullying-cyberbullying>



- Is resilience development actually bullying prevention or online safety, or is it a fortification against bullying and dignity violation as *behaviors that we have accepted as inevitable*—in effect, a stopgap measure to use while we figure out effective prevention and intervention?
- Do we accept the notion that, in terms of child development, resilience comes only with adversity, which could include social cruelty, so we simultaneously vilify and accept social cruelty, sending our children confusing mixed signals, e.g., “‘Don’t be mean’ and ‘what doesn’t kill you will make you stronger’?”

However, our field might answer these questions, we propose that giving them “focused consideration” is vital to moving toward solutions to this social problem, because how we think of the behaviors illustrated in the above scenarios will influence the design of interventions and solutions that we deem effective—as well as what we model for our children. There appears to be a growing belief that resilience will help children muscle up when they experience “little indignities” as adults in a workplace—indignities such as having one’s work ignored, being excluded from opportunities, or hearing a colleague being denigrated behind their back, even if they have done nothing wrong. If we accept these behaviors as a normal component of human nature, school, and work, such thinking will limit our—and our children’s—options for creating real social change. Building resilience is of course important but beside our point. The issue, here, is: Does it have to be this way? Does the ambiguity that continues to challenge our field need to persist? And what are we *actually* teaching children and young people about the way life has to be—are we modeling confusion or status quo acceptance rather than pro-social attitudes and behaviors?

### Living by Dignity Standards: What It Might Look Like in Practice

Coming back to the two incidents with Steven and Lynne, one might wonder what these cases would look like if children were taught about the dignity that is innate to every human being and the foundation of human rights, including their protection and participation rights (both online and offline). What would their social relations look like then? Steven might have been more aware that he was posting a video in order to receive validation from others and choose not to—because he did not need to. He might also have felt safe to be himself, knowing that it would be unlikely that anyone would belittle him for it. Sally would have been happy for the attention that her friend received, knowing that it cannot undermine her own self-worth. She might not have felt the need to put Lynne down and, in turn, Lynne

might have felt safe and accepted and might have continued participating online.

### Counterarguments Encountered

It has been argued that dignity is an abstract and complex concept, and teaching children about standards of behavior they should somehow uphold without telling them *why* might appear to them as a form of preaching and thus not understandable, relevant, or convincing. If they cannot buy into the argument, and if the world around them does not reflect these principles, why should they live by them? Furthermore, if some people should adopt and try to live by these principles while others do not, then those who do will find themselves in a position of vulnerability. Even worse, we run the risk of having children pay lip service to these principles while being incentivized by the prevailing normative values around them to think and act differently in their daily lives.

All are valid concerns. We do not believe bullying prevention education will advance if not fully aligned with children’s rights, i.e., without young people’s acceptance and participation. Research on bullying and cyberbullying prevention has shown that it is not sufficient merely to tell children and adolescents that these behaviors are not acceptable and they should therefore not engage in them (see, e.g., Jones et al., 2013; Jones & Mitchell, 2015).

It is necessary to make a compelling case as to why dignity matters. We see this as the most significant challenge for designing dignity-based cyberbullying interventions, and we adults likely need young people’s help both in making the case and designing the solutions. We believe collaboration with them is essential. Youth leadership and peer mentorship may be the only way to establish better norms of behavior in the adult world.

Some would argue that the dignity-based approach to social relations that we are proposing here is contrary to the power-seeking inherent to human nature, as outlined by Hobbes, for instance (see, e.g., Thornton, 2005). In a similar vein, they might say teaching dignity in this manner will not be effective, because society and the world of adults are not based on it and therefore will not resonate with children and teens, or that the dignity framework is idealistic. That might well be true, but (1) proponents and activists see dignity as foundational to universal human rights, (2) the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affords children protection from harm as well as participation in its mitigation, and (3) we will not know unless we give such education a try *with* our young people—see if this works for them—amid growing frustration with bullying prevention’s lack of sufficient progress to date. Importantly, it is not only children and youth who would need to adopt the dignity framework for

it to work; it is essential that adults consider whether bullying prevention can be effective if not modeled by adults or taught against the backdrop of an adult world where bullying and power-seeking are rife.

## Dignity-Oriented AI Design to Address Cyberbullying on Platforms?

From a technological standpoint, considering cyberbullying through the lens of dignity is especially important now, when social media (Steinmetz, 2019) and other platforms are increasingly relying on artificial intelligence (AI)-based tools to address user safety. People's assumptions about the problem or lack of a holistic understanding of the issue can seep into and become flawed design of proposed technological remedies such as this. Recent design innovations around community moderation promise an alternative to the dominant centralized moderation model currently used by social media platforms, and testing these with teen audiences could provide a good avenue for further research (Fan & Zhang, 2020). We invite researchers across disciplines and especially those in the field of computing—specifically machine and deep learning—to consider the problem not just from the perspective of keeping children and teens safe, but also from the perspective of their dignity as human beings; their right to participation under the CRC; and thus their capacity to act as agents for change, protection, and the social good. To go a step further, we invite stakeholders to consider what it would mean to think of cyberbullying from the perspective of promoting a dignity-based environment where self-worth does not hinge upon external validation and tech symbols thereof. What would it take to create a society *and media environment* where all participants' safety stems from feeling worthy and valuable regardless of our position in society, the attention we garner, or the number of likes and shares we receive?

In a recent focus group study with teenage girls (where the goal was to understand which AI-based interventions teens would find effective), we proposed a design where the AI could detect abusive content and prompt a friend of the victim to ask the perpetrator to stop. The girls, however, raised the following issue: “What’s the purpose of asking the perpetrator to stop [by explaining to them that their action is hurtful and attempting to trigger their empathy]?” They added, “The whole point of bullying is that it causes harm. A response [from the perpetrator] would be ‘oh well, I’m glad it’s hurtful.’” Another of their observations was that “there’s a ‘people love the drama’ attitude on social media,” almost like a learned “expectancy of some abuse sometimes” and a belief that “if you’re on social media, you should have a bit of a thick skin.” All of this suggests that there is a recognition among young people that the broader culture has

non-dignitarian elements and a learned response that, rather than change them, one just needs to accept them and adapt to them. They demonstrated that this is what has been modeled for them. Their response could also reflect values embraced by Generation Z and children and young people born thereafter which center on utility, whereby, if something is considered to be useful, then it is good and one engages in it; if it is not, one does not (see, e.g., James, 2014). As a consequence, if imposed on them by adults without consulting with them, dignity-based education would understandably appear to youth as not useful, old-fashioned, and preachy. That would certainly have implications for how the industry, including its software engineers, who are millennials themselves, will conceptualize AI-based cyberbullying interventions (see Greene et al., 2019). In other words, if some level of abuse and “a thick skin” are to be expected, that assumption may limit the scope of technological interventions that we deem desirable and possible.

## Conclusion

There is no better time to explore a different, more holistic and foundational, approach to preventing social cruelty based on human dignity—with ever greater adoption of technology, a reported mental health crisis among youth,<sup>9</sup> growing concern about algorithmic bias and ethical AI, children returning to school as the pandemic slowly subsides, and heightened social tensions in and among societies. Such an approach takes into account issues of self-worth; relational norms; cultural factors; and the conditions of children's digital, home, and school environments, as well as their human and digital rights. Rather than stressing faults within individuals or human nature, we might consider how relationships are structured in late modern society and how unstated values that inform a person's sense of self-worth<sup>10</sup> can lead to violations of peers' dignity. Rather than focusing merely on stopping aggressive behaviors, we might consider the values and cultural factors behind them. As for digital environments, they mirror our attention-driven economy and society, which make attention—digitally signaled with likes, shares, follows, and virality—a value and therefore a tool (or weapon) of status and self-worth. Rather than treating digital environments like “school,” as just another “place” where social cruelty occurs, we might consider the influences of platform features, business models, and norms *and the attention economy* on young people's sense of self and treatment

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/01/18/953581851/ive-tried-everything-pandemic-has-cut-options-for-kids-with-mental-illness>

<sup>10</sup> <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2011-15723-001>

of one another. We strongly urge our field to take up these questions and consider adopting a dignity framework for bullying/cyberbullying prevention, based on the hypothesis that doing so would send clear instructional signals, support healthy relationships among children, and grow their capacity to create positive change in their own communities both digital and physical.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** Dr. Milosevic is an SI Editor at the moment for IJBP and used to be a managing editor; Prof. O'Higgins Norman is the Editor-in-Chief.

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